

Getting Started

Even in our globalised, media-savvy world it still seems odd that any of these Indian Ocean gems needs a PR machine to promote them – each destination is so self-evidently lovely (just say their names out loud and savour the images that immediately spring to mind) – that marketing seems utterly unnecessary. Tell a friend where you're going and their reaction will say it all.

As if you needed another reason to go, travel to Mauritius, Réunion and Seychelles is exceptionally safe and easy. There are superb tourism infrastructures in each country, excellent planning resources online, a good level of English is spoken everywhere and the choice of activities, hotels and eating is hard to rival anywhere. Of course islands this beautiful are rarely free of crowds and development, so it's important to read up on specific destinations to see if they'll provide the kind of holiday you're looking for – divers looking for social life and entertainment should avoid honeymooner magnets (and vice versa), while those looking to get away from crowds should steer clear of big resorts and head off the beaten path. Of course the main disadvantage to travel here is the distance most people will need to travel. Flights are not cheap, and are environmentally harmful, although once you're in the region it's relatively inexpensive to travel about and accommodation can be tailored to almost any budget.

WHEN TO GO

Nestled between the Tropic of Capricorn and the equator, all three countries offer year-round heat and there's almost no time in any country when travel isn't advised. However, there are of course nuances, and depending on what you're interested in doing there are considerations to take into account. For example, if you're planning a hiking trip to Réunion, the best time is during the dry season, which runs from late April until October. Likewise, diving in Mauritius is best from October to December and March to April.

The time of year perhaps best avoided is January to February when it's the peak of the cyclone season. Although direct hits are rare, cyclones way offshore can still bring grey days and strong winds, even to the Seychelles, which technically lies outside the cyclone belt.

The climate in all three destinations is broadly similar: a hot, rainy summer from December to April (October to April in the Seychelles) is followed by a cooler, drier winter from May to November (May to September in the Seychelles). Rainfall levels are much higher in the mountains, particularly in Réunion, which boasts a number of world records. Cilaos holds the world record for most rain in a single day – a total of 1870mm fell on 16 March 1952.

Coastal temperatures rarely drop below 20°C in Mauritius and Réunion, or below 24°C in the Seychelles, making these islands a truly year-round destination.

For all three destinations you are advised to plan your travel well in advance, especially during the French holidays when hotels can be booked up months before. Ask your travel agent for advice on the dates of school holidays in France, which vary slightly from year to year. The Christmas to New Year period is also particularly busy. Airline reservations may be difficult to get at this time, so book well ahead to avoid disappointment. Keep in mind that many hotels hike up their room rates during the peak seasons.

For more information on the best times to travel, see p55 for Mauritius, p169 for Réunion, and p267 for the Seychelles.

For climate charts for
Mauritius see p135,
Réunion p249, Seychelles
p297.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting any necessary vaccinations and visas.
- Non-beach clothing: some of the best restaurants in all three countries are smart affairs and shorts or bikini tops simply won't do – think lightweight but smart clothing, decent shoes and non-denim trousers for men. Also if you plan to go into the mountains, bring a long-sleeved top for the cool night air.
- Plenty of sun cream, after-sun lotion and bug repellent. Since the Chikungunya epidemic (see p309) most hotels will provide free electronic mosquito repellents to put on at night, but an extra layer of protection is always good, especially for evening dining outside or for long walks.
- Walkers should bring binoculars, walking boots, a lightweight waterproof jacket, a compass and a basic medical kit.
- Divers should bring their certification and log, as well as any equipment they want to use for diving.
- Even non-divers will save money and time bringing their own mask, snorkel and flippers so they can dive right in and start exploring.
- Everyone should bring flip flops, a sun hat, good sunglasses with UV protection, a driving licence if you want to hire a car and travel insurance details to know what activities are and aren't included in your policy.

COSTS & MONEY

None of these destinations are ever going to be bargains, the main expense being the flights needed to cover the huge distances most visitors have to travel to get here. However, despite enjoying a reputation for opulence and exclusivity, it's perfectly possible to visit all three countries on a limited budget.

Seychelles has traditionally been the most expensive of the lot, and while it remains the most exclusive today, its tourist board has recently been involved in promoting cheaper accommodation options such as guesthouses; as a result the country has become a far better destination for independent travellers. Réunion is the next most expensive, while Mauritius is a very budget-friendly option for those who want to backpack, although five-star hotels also proliferate, making the huge choice of accommodation options part of the island's attraction.

You can keep accommodation costs down by staying in self-catering apartments or small guesthouses and by basing yourself in one place; the longer you stay (and the more of you there are), the cheaper it becomes. It helps to travel off-season as well: prices are generally discounted and there's more chance of being able to bargain.

On the positive side, it's possible to eat reasonably cheaply, even in the Seychelles, by patronising snack stands and getting takeaway meals – or, of course, by self-catering. Restaurants cover a huge scope of price ranges, from barely more expensive than takeaways to almost as expensive as those in London or Paris. In four- and five-star resorts and hotels, restaurants tend to be very pricey, although as most guests are on half or full-board packages, the costs are reduced. Buses in all three destinations provide a cheap method of getting around, although car hire is reasonably priced everywhere too.

It's also worth investigating package holidays, including flights and accommodation, since these can often work out cheaper than travelling independently.

HOW MUCH IN MAURITIUS?

Scuba dive Rs 1000

Meal in an upmarket restaurant Rs 500

Bottle of Phoenix beer Rs 50

Short taxi ride Rs 100

Packet of Bois Chéri vanilla tea Rs 75

HOW MUCH IN RÉUNION?Tandem flight paragliding
in St-Leu €60

Car hire per week €200

Stodgy *carri* €9One night in a *chambres
d'hôte* (double) €45

Glass of local rum €3

Mauritius

As far as a daily budget is concerned, backpackers staying in the cheapest guesthouses and eating meals at street stands can expect to spend in the region of €25 to €30 per person. Opting for a midrange hotel and smarter restaurants will push it up to at least €50. These costs are calculated on the basis of two people sharing a room; single travellers will need to budget extra. As soon as you jump to four- and five-star accommodation you're looking at €175 per person at the very minimum.

Réunion

Prices in Réunion are roughly similar to those found in mainland France. The absolute minimum daily budget, possible if you're staying in youth hostels and the cheapest guesthouses and eating takeaway meals or self-catering, will be €40 per person on the basis of two people sharing a room. For a reasonably comfortable midrange hotel, with a light lunch and dinner in a decent restaurant, you're looking at around €80 to €100 per person.

Seychelles

Visitors to the Seychelles on a tight budget will struggle to get by on less than €70 per person per day (on the basis of two people sharing a room in a guesthouse or self-contained bungalow). A more realistic budget, allowing you to stay at a moderately priced hotel and treat yourself to a few good restaurants, will come in at around €100 to €150 per person per day. Living it up in a top-end resort will usually cost at least €250 per person per day, but will shoot up very quickly with meals and activities. Island hopping and indulging in excursions and other activities also jacks costs up considerably.

HOW MUCH IN SEYCHELLES?One night in a swish
resort – the sky's the
limit

Local bus ride €0.25

Boat excursion €90

One dive €50

Bottle of beer €1.20

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There's a surprisingly small amount of literature about each island, although there are definitely some interesting writings available if you persevere. Bernardin de St-Pierre's 1773 *Journey to Mauritius* describes Mauritius in its early colonial period, complete with a horrendous account of the treatment of slaves, the experience of which would inform Bernardin de St-Pierre's later works, including his classic *Paul and Virginie* (1787), the now deeply unfashionable love story of two young French émigrés brought up in Mauritius (see the boxed text, p83).

A more recent addition to the writing about the island is Patrick O'Brian's enjoyable historical novel *The Mauritius Command* (1977), a swashbuckling adventure in the Aubrey-Maturin series, which sees Captain Jack Aubrey sent on a mission to rid Mauritius and Réunion of the French during the Napoleonic Wars. It's considered by some to be the best of the entire Aubrey-Maturin series.

In his funny and informative book *Golden Bats & Pink Pigeons*, naturalist Gerald Durrell tells of his time spent rescuing a number of Mauritian species from the brink of extinction. Durrell was too late for the dodo, but Errol Fuller does the bird proud with his comprehensive and quirky *Dodo: From Extinction to Icon*, which covers the history and the myths surrounding this endearing creature.

An unusual book about Réunion's social history is Françoise Vergès' *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, which looks at the complex relationship between the colonisers and colonised on the island through a number of different prisms.

Seychelles travel lit is best represented by Athol Thomas' *Forgotten Eden*. Though written in the 1960s and now out of print, it still paints a vivid picture of the beauty and magic of these islands.

TOP FIVE...**Beaches in the Region**

- Trou d'Argent, Rodrigues, Mauritius (p128) – this remote stunner on the island of Rodrigues is well deserving of its cult status.
- Île aux Cerfs, Mauritius (p98) – sadly no longer a secret, but the white sand and shallow cobalt-blue water of this beautiful offshore island are unforgettable.
- Anse Source d'Argent, La Digue, Seychelles (p291) – one of the most famous tropical beaches in the world, this beauty is something out of pure fantasy.
- Anse Lazio, Praslin, Seychelles (p281) – Praslin's loveliest beach boasts great sand and an unbelievably blue lagoon.
- Anse Intendance, Mahé, Seychelles (p278) – in the south of the main island of Mahé, this beautiful stretch of sand will not disappoint.

Festivals & Events

- Divali (Dipavali) – processions and dance displays mark the festival of light in Réunion (p227) and Mauritius (p137); late October or early November.
- Festival Kreol – Seychellois celebrate Creole culture with a week of music, dance and other jollifications (p298); last week in October.
- Maha Shivaratri – Mauritian Hindus turn out in force to make offerings at the holy lake of Grand Bassin (p89); February or March.
- Teemeedee – Hindus and Tamils brave the heat during fire-walking ceremonies in Mauritius (p136) and Réunion (p227); December and January.
- Grand Raid – in the aptly named 'cross-country for crazies', participants run across Réunion in just 18 hours (p248); October or November.

Beyond the Reefs by William Travis takes a look back at the Seychelles of the 1970s, before conservation issues came to the fore, when Travis saw plenty of action as a shark fisher and latter-day adventurer.

Empires of the Monsoon by Richard Hall is the most informative and entertaining history of the Indian Ocean. It only touches briefly on Mauritius, Réunion and the Seychelles, but it does place them in a broader context.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Mauritius Government Portal (www.gov.mu) This huge and multifaceted site contains all the information you could ever need about Mauritius including a huge selection of links.

Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (www.tourism-mauritius.mu) The official site of Mauritius on the web has a great selection of hotels, activities and other useful information including plenty of ecotourism suggestions.

Reunion Tourisme (www.la-reunion-tourisme.com) Réunion's official tourist website (in French only) is an encyclopaedia of things to see and do.

Seychelles.net (www.seychelles.net) Official home of the Seychelles Tourism Board, this website overflows with great tips and ideas.

Virtual Seychelles (www.virtalseychelles.sc) An excellent resource for background about Seychelles, including webcams and links to specialist websites for all interests.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

As well as creating much of the region's wealth, tourism has cost local people and, most particularly, the local environment dearly. Worst affected are the coasts and particularly the fringing lagoon, where areas of the coral reef and the fragile marine environment are seriously degraded. The sheer

TIPS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

- Be careful not to damage coral reefs when diving or snorkelling.
- Never buy souvenirs made from materials such as turtleshell, seashells or coral.
- Never drop litter anywhere and bring a bag to pick up any litter left by less considerate people.
- Buy locally made produce, souvenirs and other day-to-day objects whenever possible.
- Don't light fires and be very careful when disposing of cigarette butts, particularly during droughts or the dry season.

number of tourists also makes extra demands on water supplies, electricity and other resources; creates problems of waste management; and puts more vehicles on the roads.

The good news is that all three countries are now taking these problems seriously and generally as a result development has been curtailed to a more considered pace. Ecotourism has been expanded enormously too, although in many places it is more of a buzzword than anything particularly beneficial to the environment.

Not that tourism can be blamed for all of the region's environmental woes of course, but there are positive steps that we as individual travellers can take to lessen our impact on the environment (see the boxed text, above).

For further guidelines regarding the underwater world see the boxed text, p32; for tips on low-impact hiking, see the boxed text, p235.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

JAUNT AROUND MAURITIUS

Two Weeks

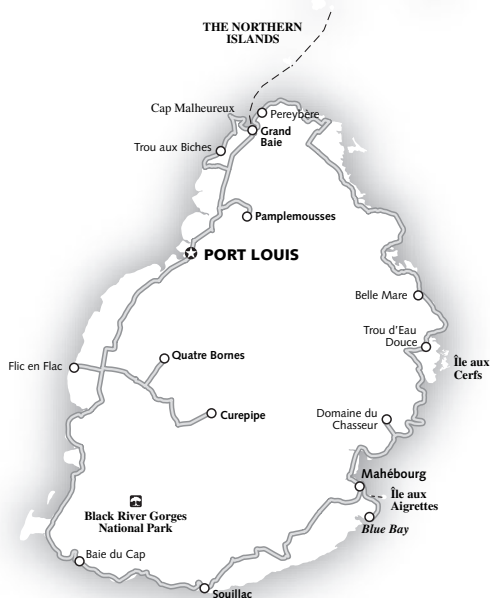
A fortnight is ideal to sample the many facets of Mauritian life. Because Mauritius is so small, it's possible to base yourself in one place and make day trips by bus, taxi or hire car.

Start with discovering the markets and museums of **Port Louis** (p55), then head north to **Trou aux Biches** (p68) or **Pereybere** (p79). Possible excursions include **Pamplemousses** (p83), **Grand Baie** (p72) and the **northern islands** (p78).

Admire the views at **Cap Malheureux** (p81), before heading south to laze on the beaches at **Belle Mare** (p98), which stretch in long, white, sandy arcs south to **Trou d'Eau Douce** (p95). Make this your base for day trips to the **Île aux Cerfs** (p98) and the **Domaine du Chasseur** (p117).

After a few days, decamp to the laid-back town of **Mahébourg** (p111) or the sparkling azure lagoon of **Blue Bay** (p115); eco-explore **Île aux Aigrettes** (p116).

Drive south along the glorious coast road via **Souillac** (p119) and **Baie du Cap** (p121) to make your next stop **Flic en Flac** (p103). Here you can delight in the underwater world, go hiking in the **Black River Gorges** (p87) and rummage for clothes around **Curepipe** (p90) and **Quatre Bornes** (p92) before heading back to Port Louis.



The two-week circuit of Mauritius will take you to sun-drenched beaches, botanical gardens, idyllic islands and lively market towns, all packed into just 300km.

TOUR OF RÉUNION

Two Weeks

In two weeks, you can loop around the island, take a couple of jaunts into the interior and even visit a bubbling volcano.

Spend the first day sampling the infamous nightlife of **St-Gilles-les-Bains** (p182) before heading to the beach to recover at **L'Hermitage-les-Bains** (p182). Allow three days to make the most of the area's botanical gardens, museums and water sports.

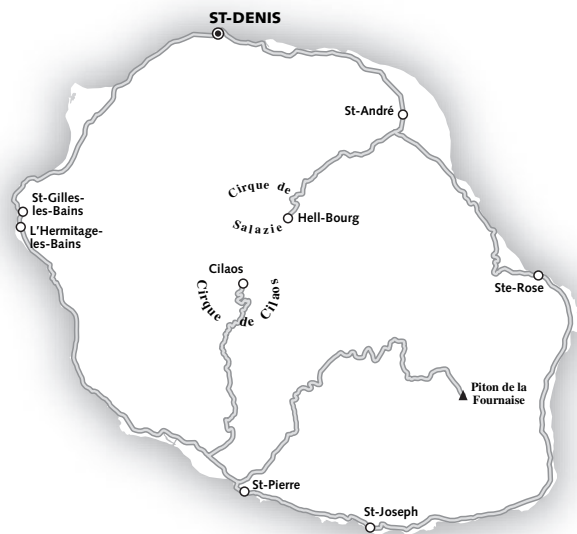
Head next to the **Cirque de Cilaos** (p197), where you should allow at least two days to soak up the rugged mountain scenery and the laid-back atmosphere.

The volcano awaits at **Piton de la Fournaise** (p210). Base yourself at the Gîte du Volcan, ready to make a dawn ascent for stunning views.

Next make for the bright lights of **St-Pierre** (p212) – if possible, get here for the huge Saturday market and stay the night near **St-Joseph** (p220). Don't miss **Ste-Rose** (p229), where lava laps at the door of a church and narrowly misses the Virgin Mary.

As you head back to the north of the island, go inland and stay at least two nights in **Hell-Bourg** (p203), exploring the **Cirque de Salazie** (p202). Finally, set off towards the capital via the Indian-influenced **St-André** (p225) and end your trip sampling café-culture and Creole architecture in the capital, **St-Denis** (p169).

From sophisticated beach resorts to mountain villages, art galleries to volcanoes, two weeks is perfect to sample the variety Réunion has to offer. Get hooked on the hiking, and you could easily fill a month. This tour covers around 400km.



ESSENTIAL SEYCHELLES

Two Weeks

Two weeks is fine for a taster of the Seychelles' islands – allowing plenty of time for enjoying the very best of the country's superb beaches.

On the first day, tune into island life in the capital, **Victoria** (p267), checking out the market and strolling among the palm trees in the botanical gardens. Move on to **Beau Vallon** (p272), where three days can easily be spent messing around in and on the water – schedule in a day's diving or a boat trip to **Ste Anne Marine National Park** (p273). Devote the next two days to the beaches and byways of **Mahé** (p267), and walking in the **Morne Seychellois National Park** (p275).

Next, cruise over to **Praslin** (p280). Ogle curvaceous coco de mer nuts in the **Vallée de Mai** (p281), before flaking out on the perfect, sugar-white sands at **Anse Lazio** (p281). Fill the next four days with snorkelling, diving and swimming off **Anse Volbert** (p283), getting up close and personal with giant tortoises on **Curieuse Island** (p283) and walking among cacophonous clouds of sea birds on **Cousin Island** (p283).

From Praslin, make sail for **La Digue** (p289). Three days is the perfect amount of time to lapse into La Digue's slow vibe. Visit **Anse Source d'Argent** (p291) – the archetypal paradise beach. Get there late afternoon for the best atmosphere. Take a snorkelling trip around nearby islands, then find solitude on the beaches of **Grand Anse** (p291) and **Petite Anse** (p291). All too soon, it will be time to tear yourself away for the trip back to Victoria.

In just 200km and two weeks, this tour will cover the three main islands and a smattering of satellite islands, plus a sampler of marine parks, bird reserves and native forests. There's even time for boat trips and water sports.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

RODRIGUES – THE OTHER MAURITIUS

One Week

Some call Rodrigues a mini-Mauritius, even though it's different in almost every way. What they really mean is that this is the closest you can get to Mauritius before tourism took off, with an almost total lack of development compared to the mainland, and few tourists who make it out this far, on the 1½-hour flight into the Indian Ocean. A week is ample time to discover the delights of this small, mountainous island. Depending on the weather you can divide the days between walking, diving and taking boat trips to nearby islands.

First, though, spend half a day strolling the streets of **Port Mathurin** (p125). The island's endearingly sleepy 'capital' springs into life on Saturday morning when it seems the entire population descends for the weekly market.

The classic coastal hike starts at **St François** (p128), then heads south via a gem of a beach at **Trou d'Argent** (p128) to **Gravier** (p128), from where there are buses back to Port Mathurin. On a separate outing, climb **Mt Limon** (p129) for island-wide views.

You're spoilt for choice when it comes to diving. Top spots include the channel off St François, **La Passe St François** (p29), on the edge of the lagoon, with more options beyond the reefs. As for boat trips, first choice should be **Île aux Cocos** (p131) for its wealth of birdlife. There's good snorkelling around the little-visited **Île aux Chats** and **Île Hermitage** (p131) off the south coast.

On your last day, treat yourself to a seafood feast at one of the great family-run restaurants scattered around the island.

Leave behind the commercialism of Mauritius' main island for a week to discover a more traditional way of life among the fishing and agricultural communities of Rodrigues. Divers are in for a treat, too, exploring the underwater world of the massive, encircling lagoon.



RÉUNION'S SUD SAUVAGE

One Week

Réunion's 'Wild South' offers volcanic landscapes, massive ravines, wave-lashed cliffs and sensational hiking trails. You can discover the best of the region in a reasonably leisurely week.

Start at **Ste-Rose** (p229) and head south to find the first tongues of lava tumbling down to the sea. Pay a quick visit to the **Vierge au Parasol** (p230) before crossing the threatening lava fields of **Le Grand Brûlé** (p224), to spend a night or two near **St-Philippe** (p223) or **St-Joseph** (p220); stay up in the hills for a real taste of rural life. From here you can visit a spice garden, learn about vanilla and local crafts or hike the spectacular **Rivière des Remparts** (p221).

Pass quickly through **St-Pierre** (p212) en route to the high plateau of **Plaine-des-Cafres** (p208) to visit the **Maison du Volcan** (p208). Take the magnificent forest road up to **Piton de la Fournaise** (p210), Réunion's restless volcano. Climb to the top at the crack of dawn; circuit the crater rim to leave the crowds behind.

Now drop back down to Plaine-des-Cafres, where you could spend a couple of days hiking to **Grand Bassin** (p209), a village at the end of the world. Finally, head for **Plaine-des-Palmistes** (p211), where the hikes through the **Forêt de Bébour-Bélouve** (p212) and to **Trou de Fer** (p212) provide unforgettable experiences.

This one-week tour of southern Réunion takes you across lava fields, past breathtaking coastal scenery and up a volcano to gaze into the jaws of the giant. It ends 200km later among the quiet rural villages of the high plains.



TAILORED TRIPS

THE ADRENALIN RUSH

Réunion rightly markets itself as the 'intense isle'; almost every conceivable stomach-churning, heart-pumping activity is on offer. With a bit of planning – and a fair amount of cash – adventure-sports enthusiasts can test their stamina in an action-packed week. Check your insurance policy, take a deep breath and go for it!

Kick off day one in **St-Gilles-les-Bains** (p206) with an ear-popping helicopter ride, ducking and weaving around the three Cirques. On landing, hotfoot it up to **Le Maïdo** (p180), grab a mountain bike and hurtle down to the coast again along vertiginous biking trails.

Later that day push on to **Cilaos** (p197). Make a crack-of-dawn start to scale the almost vertical **Piton des Neiges** (p199); to really enjoy the experience, spread the climb over two days. On day four, there's a choice between slithering down canyons, bouncing down rivers on a raft or galloping amid forests and pastures in the Hautes Plaines in Réunion's heartland.

At the end of day four, up sticks for **St-Leu** (p189). Spend days five and six swooping high above the lagoon by paraglider, plunging off the reef to scuba dive with sharks, or surfing the world-famous left-hander – La Gauche de St-Leu –

at the mouth of the **Ravine des Colimaçons** (p190); less-experienced surfers will find thrills and spills aplenty riding the area's quieter waves.

Day seven? Definitely the day of rest!

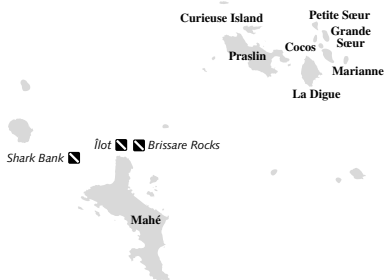
DIVER'S & SNORKELLER'S DELIGHT

You could spend a lifetime diving the reefs and granite outcrops of the Seychelles, but a week is enough time to sample a range of sites, including some of the very best in the Indian Ocean.

Jump in at the deep end at **Shark Bank** (p31) off the northwest coast of **Mahé** (p31). No prizes for guessing what's in store here: sharks aplenty with their stingray sidekicks, barracuda and other bruisers. Off Mahé's north tip, **Ilot** (p32) offers an unbelievable variety of smaller fish in shimmering shoals. Nearby, **Brissaire Rocks** (p32) is ablaze with fire coral.

On day four, head over to **Praslin** (p32) for a change of scene. The waters around **Curieuse Island** (p283) are teeming with fish life in dazzling, dizzying displays.

Spend your last day exploring the islands northwest of **La Digue** (p32). The rock formations around **Ile Cocos** (p291), **Marianne** (p32) and the sisters, **Petite** and **Grande Sœur** (p291), are out of this world. Marine turtles are common, while stingrays, eagle rays and reef sharks add a touch of spice. Even the odd manta and whale shark cruise through from time to time.



On the Road



TOM MASTERS COORDINATING AUTHOR

Few days in Mauritius rivalled this one, when after a long day of research we arrived at the beautiful colonial-era estate of Eureka (p94), set beneath towering peaks and amid thick forest, for an overnight stay. A short hike down the hillside took us to a series of fantastic waterfalls for a cold shower and swim, which was a blissful release from the afternoon heat. We were back in time to watch sunset from the terrace with a rum punch – magical.

JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET

Scratching the leathery neck of a giant tortoise in the Seychelles is an experience I won't forget – I was utterly fascinated by these animals that seem to come straight off the set of *Jurassic Park*. They can easily be seen on Curieuse Island (p283) and Bird Island (p288). On Bird Island, I even paid my respects to Esmeralda – a 300kg, two-centuries-old monster of a specimen. My tip: bring the kids!



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